

The RED MOUSE

A Mystery Romance

By WILLIAM HAMILTON OSBORNE

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CHAPTER XII.

SOMEWHERE on the east side, beyond Gramercy park and Irving place, with their beautiful old houses, where poverty and suffering are all about, and which are commonly termed "the slums"—some where there, we say, in one of the smaller tenement buildings some months later Miriam Challoner, one time woman of society, took refuge.

In a far corner of one of her two little rooms was a stove on which a frugal meal was cooking—a meal that in former days she would not have thought possible even for her servants.

At the window of this room, which was bedroom and living room combined, upon a small table was a typewriter, before which sat Miriam Challoner, clad in somber dress. She was pale, and her face was grief-stricken—the look of a woman acquainted with grief.

Suddenly she halted and fingered the copy lying on the table at her right.

"Twenty more pages. I can't do them now," she muttered and, crossing the room, threw herself upon the bed, a cheap bed that groaned as if it felt her weight upon it.

"Tired! I'm so tired!" she moaned.

Suddenly she sat bolt upright, for the sound of a timid knock on the door had reached her ears. A moment more, and she was at the door. For a second Miriam could not believe her own eyes. Then she cried, half joyfully, half regretfully:

"Why, it's Shirley Bloodgood! Oh, why did you come?"

"Returned Shirley. I have searched for you for months, and it was only yesterday that I learned from Stevens where you were, who, by the way, had orders not to reveal your whereabouts."

"But why did you come?" Miriam protested.

Shirley stretched forth her arms, saying:

"And you didn't want to see me?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Miriam, clinging to Shirley affectionately. "But I hoped you never would see this! And she spread out her arms as though to exhibit the room."

"What a poor opinion you have of me! Why, Miriam, I value your friendship too highly to desert you on account of this."

"And Laurie—how is he?" asked Shirley.

Miriam's eyes kindled for an instant.

"Poor boy," she answered. "He's under such a strain. It's a wonder he doesn't break down. He's so good and kind through it all too. He's a fine fellow now," she went on, with great enthusiasm.

"Let me see," said Shirley reminiscently. "His conviction was reversed on appeal, wasn't it?"

"Why, no. Don't you remember that it was affirmed—affirmed?"

"I do remember now. And it was the next day that you ran away from me, and I've never seen you since. Affirmed—affirmed," she mused and then inquired eagerly, "Then how did he get off?"

"Nobody knows," replied Miriam. "not even Laurie. One day after the affirmation the jail doors were opened, and he was free—that's all."

"Surely Murgatroyd knows," said Shirley.

"Oh, yes, he knows, but we never ask questions. Why should we? I shall never forget him. I remember him in my prayers. He was honest; he kept his word."

Shirley smiled a grim smile.

"Murgatroyd, the man with a price!"

"I can't forgive myself," sighed Miriam.

"You? What for, pray?" asked Shirley.

"For blurring out in the courtroom what I did when the jury found Laurie guilty. It was treachery! I had promised, don't you see?"

"Murgatroyd would have been a fool to acquit Laurie on that trial," added Shirley sneeringly. "Oh, yes, he's clever."

"Fortunately nobody believed me," exclaimed Miriam.

"Except myself," observed Shirley. "and Murgatroyd."

"Even Laurie didn't believe me," went on Miriam. "We never discuss the subject, anyway. It's barely possible," she said, flushing, "that he thinks we spent the money long ago."

There was a pause that was a trifle embarrassing to both women. Miriam was the first to speak.

"Murgatroyd is making a name for himself, isn't he?"

"Who wouldn't with stolen money to back him!" Shirley exclaimed.

Miriam shook her head.

"He's doing good work with it. He's breaking up the organization—the inside ring. I'm sure that his work is felt even over here in—the slums."

And then she added vehemently, "But his best work will be over when he breaks up Cradleigh's. If he—"

"After he downs Cradleigh's," interrupted Shirley. "I hope he'll down himself. That's my wish for Billy Murgatroyd."

"Murgatroyd is honest," protested Miriam.

"You mistake his motive, Miriam."

went on Shirley. "He's frightfully ambitious. Why," went on Shirley, "he's planning to go to the senate!" But she did not add that she had put the idea into his head. "Think of Billy Murgatroyd being senator! He'll ask a billion the next time he's bought. Instead of a million."

"You forget," reminded Miriam. "that I stand up for Murgatroyd."

"Poor Miriam!" sighed Shirley to herself. "She always was easily fooled."

A moment later she exclaimed, "A typewriter!"

"I don't wonder at your surprise," said Miriam. "But I like the work immensely. I work for people in the neighborhood," she explained—"a real estate dealer and—"

They were interrupted by a faint whistle.

"It's the speaking tube," said Miriam tremblingly, but the next instant she was in a little dark alcove calling down the tube.

Suddenly the outer door opened. It was thrust open with great violence, and James Lawrence Challoner came into the room with the stamp of the gutter upon him.

Shirley was dumfounded. Quickly her mind went back to that afternoon, long ago it seemed, when he had come home after the tragedy. Then, it is true, he was unkempt, soiled, but now—And she asked herself whether it were possible that Miriam could not see the man as he really was. The answer was immediately forthcoming. For Miriam went over and caught him in her embrace.

"Poor Laurie! Tired, aren't you, dear?" she said fondly, and then, turning toward the girl, "Here's an old friend of ours—Shirley Bloodgood!"

"So I see," he growled and demanded gruffly:

"Well, where's your money? I've got to have some money right away."

"Yes, Laurie," Miriam faltered; "yes, of course," and, turning to Shirley, added as an apology for him, "Such an ordeal as Laurie has been through—such a strain!"

What Shirley had seen made her heartsick.

"Oh," she suddenly exclaimed, "I have forgotten all about father! I left him alone. I simply must go now. You don't know how glad—" And turning to Challoner, she held out her hand to him. But, ignoring her completely, he again said to his wife:

"Miriam, where is that money?"

"Laurie is such a business man now, Shirley," said Miriam, smiling bravely. Halfway across the room Shirley now halted and, opening her purse, took from it a fifty dollar bill.

"There, Miriam," she said, with a note of relief, "I have been meaning for a long time to pay back that \$50 I borrowed from you a few years ago, when I was so hard up for money. I'm ashamed not to have returned it before. There, dear, I've put it on the chiffonier, and now goodbye." And she was gone.

Miriam knew that there never had been such a loan. Rushing into the hall, she called to the other to come back, but Shirley was well out of hearing.

Shirley's flight did not worry Challoner. He took advantage of Miriam's temporary absence to steal to the chiffonier and to seize the fifty dollar bill. Miriam entered as he took the money.

"Put that back!" she cried. "We are not thieves! I'm going to send it back to Shirley."

"What do you think I am," Challoner grinned—"a fool?"

"I want you to put that back!"

"I need money," he snarled, stowing it deep in his trousers pocket.

Challoner sought to escape, but Miriam caught him by the arm and pulled him back. She was beside herself with sudden anger, with shame, with agony.

"You let me go!" he growled. Then followed a struggle. Challoner finally

succeeded in wrenching himself free. And now, turning quickly, he smote Miriam with his clinched hand full in the face.

Miriam staggered back.

"Oh, Laurie!" she cried. There upon her face was a broad, blotched mark, the bruise that the brute had left there.

He made a movement to go. Quick as a flash she had darted to the chiffonier and drew forth a weapon.

"Stop!" she cried in a hard voice.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"What am I going to do? I know what you're going to do! You're going to bring that \$50 back here to me!"

"Indeed? Well, I'm not!" reiterated Challoner.

Miriam tapped the pistol in her hand. "Well, what of it?" he grunted.

"Give me that money," she insisted. Challoner started toward the door.

"Stop!" The blow that had struck her face had suddenly transformed her into a desperate woman.

Challoner stopped. Again, without affecting her aim, Miriam tapped the pistol.

"Listen to me!" she cried, her voice growing hoarse. "This thing has been responsible for one murder, and now, Lawrence Challoner, I'm going to kill you with it! I hate you! I despise you!" she raged. "I loved you once. I have always loved you until now. You loved me once, too, I know, though other people thought that you married me for my money. But I knew different. You couldn't fool me about that. And it was because of that love that I have lived for you and nothing else. You have been everything in the world to me—my god, almost. But it is all over now! I'm going to have you thrown like some soiled rag into the gutters of humanity where you belong!"

She paused for breath.

"There are two things," she resumed. "That stand out in my memory just now. The first is the night when you did not come home. Do you remember that night? No; there were too many of them later on. But I have never forgotten that night! I spent it in the torture chamber. It was a white night for me."

Her voice deepened.

"Lawrence Challoner, the time will come when you will wall and whine and wonder why I don't come to you. But you will wait for me through a long, long night, and I shall never come."

"Oh, it does me good when I recall the day that Prosecutor Murgatroyd told those twelve men the kind of man you were," she declared scornfully.

"But now I'm going to do more to you than you ever did to me—more than Murgatroyd did to you."

She went on mercilessly:

"I'm going to tear your soul out! Yes, you've got a soul or I would never have gone down into the depths with you! But now I'm through serving you without receiving so much as a smile," she continued fiercely, her body awaying, but her aim still true.

"I don't ask for my rights or my just dues. A smile and a kind word now and then are all I ask. My pride is not all gone. I'd like to be proud of you just once. I lie about you to my friends—to my dearest friends—and you convict me with the miserable truth. I cling to you through all your vices; I cling to you even when you killed; I cling to you because I knew that somewhere within you there was something that clamored for me, that clung to my affection. But, feeble as it was, it is dead now. And you are the shell, the ugly hulk, a thing without the soul that I cared for. But I'm through with you. I'm going to kill you—don't you move—I'm through with you—through!" The next moment she dropped the weapon, and it fell clattering to the floor.

At that instant Shirley Bloodgood once more entered the room.

Miriam burst forth into another wild laugh and threw herself into the arms of the girl unconscious.

"She's fainted," said Shirley.

Challoner thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a fifty dollar bill, saying in a strange tone:

"Shirley, I took this fifty dollar bill. You'd better take it. It belongs to you."

The girl took it wonderingly.

"I'll take care of her," Challoner went on, gently taking the form of his young wife in his arms.

Shirley Bloodgood left them, and as the door closed on her Challoner leaned over Miriam and stroked her face and kissed her affectionately, while the tears rolled down his cheeks. That same night she was taken to a hospital with a raging fever.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE following morning James Lawrence Challoner did that which he had never done since his marriage—he started out to look for a job. Had he been given to self analysis he would have known that it was Miriam's wrath in her adversity that had kindled into flame the dying spark of his manhood.

"I must find work!" he said over and over to himself.

At the end of two weeks he found himself at the end of a long line of Italian laborers seeking employment.

The foreman called out in surprise: "What do you want?"

"Work!" replied the man inside the shell of Challoner.

"With the 'ginneys?"

"With the 'ginneys,'" assented Challoner.

The foreman stared.

"All right. Let's have your name."

Challoner hesitated. A new light shone in his eyes as he said:

"Challoner—J. L."

And all that day he worked—worked with his hands and with his feet—worked with the gang tamping concrete. After two hours of it Challoner thought he would drop in his tracks.

It so happened that his work was on a new department store. Concrete had suddenly come into prominence as a building material. Challoner and the gang stood inside a wooden mold some two or three feet wide and as long as the wall which they were building; another gang poured in about them a mixture of sand, cement and stone. Sand, cement and stone meant nothing to Challoner except that when those three things were mixed with water and dumped into his trench he had to lift his tamping and pound the mixture into solidity in order to make the wall hard and smooth.

For days he was stiff, lame and sore

all over. In his soul he wanted to die, but he lived on. And then, much to his amazement, he found that the harder he worked the better he felt. The poison of his disolute living was working toward the surface.

Finally the doctors allowed him to visit Miriam in the hospital.

"I've got a job, dear," he whispered to her. Those five words were a history to Miriam.

After a little while Miriam put out a thin hand and let it rest in his, saying:

"How much do they give you, dear?"

Not without a suggestion of pride in his voice, he answered:

"A dollar and a half a day."

A mere pittance, yet the woman's face was radiant with joy.

It was not long before Challoner found that his arms and back and shoulders were perceptibly enlarging. And then a greater joy—he realized that his soul was surging back into his body. He had driven it out, but it would not stay away.

From time to time Challoner noted that the tamping was developing him too much on one side. With the long broom handle, the weight down at the end, his downward stroke had been a right handed one. So now he tried using force from the left side. And with that Challoner made a discovery:

After many experiments it had been gradually borne in upon him that light but incessant and vigorous tamping in one spot was more effective than the heavy, battering strokes employed by the Italians.

"If the tampers were only light enough," he argued to himself, "a fellow could almost use two of them—one in each hand."

And so he tried it with the two tampers that were on the work, but they proved to be too heavy. Then one night he made a pair of lighter ones and experimented with them. It was too much of a strain. He could not handle them satisfactorily. Somehow the work needed the concentrated effort of two arms.

All one night he sat up trying to figure it out. "And yet," he assured himself repeatedly, "I'm on the right track." And so it proved, for at 4 o'clock in the morning the idea came.

"I've got it," he exclaimed, jumping to his feet—"a pump handle!"

A week later Challoner rigged up a simple contrivance depending upon strong leverage—one that would do the work of a man much more easily.

(To be continued.)

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